Steering Subcommittee on
Academic Concerns
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Budget restructuring will radically change the ways in which subsidies are allocated with the intention of rewarding productive behavior and entrepreneurial activity rather than distributing funds based on historical formulae. While we generally agree with the philosophical changes, we are concerned that the new budget model could inadvertently encourage activities that are not academically meritorious in an effort to maximize a given unit’s recapture of the funds it views itself as having earned. Under the model promulgated in BR IX, 30% (or so) of the tuition/subsidy generated will be returned to the center for distribution and the remainder will belong to the unit which generated it. Two negative outcomes may be hypothesized: a) there may be a mad scramble to generate more credit hours and; b) there may be concerted efforts to cut the cost of teaching each credit hour.

In the first category of concerns (pedagogically unsound enhancement of credit hours), the general concern is for curricular quality control which may be corrupted by any of the following practices:

1. Course Duplication. Multiple units may design and offer courses which are essentially identical in an effort to harvest a greater yield of tuition/subsidy.

2. Curricular Territoriality. A unit may lay claim to a particular content area in an effort to prevent other units from teaching it. For instance, the Math Department may assert a proprietary interest in teaching calculus even though some engineering departments may have a desire and ability to teach an applied course that is more relevant to its needs.

3. Grade Inflation. Although this is hardly a new problem, under a budget-driven model, particularly in a student-as-customer climate, there will be a greater incentive to give artificially high grades in order to attract a greater number of student customers.

4. Targeting of Well-heeled students. Certain groups of students with more money may lead to differential tuition charges depending on ability to pay. This is already happening in units which bring in continuing education students.

5. Superfluous Courses. Popular, but academically unsound courses, such as Medical French may be offered to capture tuition and subsidy.

6. Decreased Interdisciplinary Teaching. The current inability to allocate teaching credit to multiple sources and turf issues over content may provide significant disincentives to teach in a cooperative interdisciplinary format.

7. Pressure on Course Advisors. Academic advisors may be pressured to recommend certain courses to appease units bold enough to interfere with the advising process.

8. Expectations for Teaching Faculty. Faculty may experience additional pressure to teach without a compensatory change in current activities.
Among the insalubrious cost-cutting activities, the following are possible outcomes:

1. **Expansion of Auxiliary Faculty, GTAs et al.** It will be cheaper to have nontenure track instructors teaching as many credit hours as possible. This could lead to lower quality instruction and a greater number of underpaid people without the protections afforded by tenure.

2. **Overcrowding of Classrooms.** Since we will also be taxed on space, there will be an incentive to put as many students in each classroom as possible to maximize the profit to the unit. Moreover, units which teach in luxurious facilities, e.g. the Business School, may attract more students by virtue of their facilities than units which are forced to teach in dilapidated facilities e.g. Hughes Hall, Cunz Hall, B&Z to name a few.

3. **Substitutes for Classroom Experience.** There may be a concerted push to develop inferior distance learning programs to minimize resources required to offer a course. This is particularly a concern in courses that require hands on experience in order to impart the information. The distance learning format may be a poor substitute for that instruction, and even more attention needs to be given to quality controls on distance learning.

4. **Shift to Continuing Education.** An emphasis on continuing education may be more lucrative than traditional instruction and fuel a movement in that direction even where such a change in format is injurious to on-campus programs.

As we begin to anticipate the kinds of problems that will be created under the budget restructuring model, it is clear that CAA will play a major role in the adjudication of these difficulties. It is equally clear that CAA is already overburdened and cannot be expected to arbitrate the myriad of disputes that are likely to arise under the new budget model. Our subcommittee considered a variety of options for assuring that academic quality of our curriculum is the primary determinant in any curricular changes that are made. We make the following recommendations:

1. **Understanding Current Practice.** Most faculty are unaware of how rigorously new courses and proposed changes to old ones are reviewed by the Office of Academic Affairs prior to approval. Our review of current practices increases our confidence that most egregious, flagrantly avaricious behavior will be stemmed at the source. Some of the relevant practices are:

   a) **Courses.** Proposals to add, drop or change courses are reviewed in detail in OAA by the Vice Provost for Curriculum and Institutional Relations. In this review, special attention is given to concurrence. Do units with related interests at least know about the proposal and/or have they provided a formal statement of concurrence? If the answer is yes, then the proposal goes forward; if not, the proposing unit is asked to seek such support from appropriate units. Once the related units have been contacted, if one or more of the related units do not support the proposal, then the Vice Provost will attempt to mediate the dispute. If the latter fails, the proposal will be sent to CAA for review and final action.

   Once a proposal has been approved by OAA/CAA, it is sent to the Registrar’s Office where the course is announced on the “Circulating Form.” In effect, the proposed course is announced to the whole university via this mechanism. Other units have the opportunity, at this time, to voice any objections that they may have. In this way, there is another opportunity for units which may not have known about the proposal but should have been contacted to have input. If there is an objection, the implementation process will be stopped until the issue has been resolved as indicated above. If there are no further objections, the course (or course change) will receive formal approval at this point.
b) Programs

New degree programs, or major revisions to existing programs, are reviewed in detail and acted upon by CAA. That review includes issues of concurrence from related units. Action would be announced in the minutes of CAA (now available on the OSU web page) and in the annual report of CAA. Indeed, new degree programs would need formal Senate, BOT and Regents’ approval before implementation. This system works well as seen in the recent approval of major curriculum changes on campus.

2. New Protocols. Despite the success of the long-established review practices in OAA and CAA, in recognition of emerging concerns with budget restructuring, we recommend establishment of a new set of protocols to which units would adhere in creating new courses or programs and revising existing ones. Consultation with affected units and concurrence would be central to the protocols. OAA is currently working on them.

3. A Snapshot of the Status Quo. We cannot determine whether inappropriate changes are being made in the curriculum, who teaches our courses, or what kinds of grades are being awarded, if we do not know what the situation is now. Therefore, we endorse OAA’s plan to develop a baseline cross-section of the University curriculum against which proposed changes can be compared. For each academic department, a list of current course names and content, enrollment level, grade point average and format of instruction will be established. As new proposals come forward, they can be evaluated from that baseline information. This exercise should catch most of the course duplications, predatory courses, territorial courses, alterations in grading standards, and mode of instruction. This analysis can be performed annually by OAA and used to monitor unhealthy practices or trends. The data set is currently being assembled for each academic department/school during summer 1999 and is being reviewed by the Vice Provost for Curriculum and Institutional Relations.

4. Establishment of a Working Committee. As previously acknowledged, oversight of budget restructuring-induced curricular changes is too onerous a burden to place on CAA. Thus, we recommend that a new working committee, which reports directly to CAA, be formed to deal with issues that emerge (particularly course duplication and curricular ownership). This would be analogous to the Faculty Committee on Admissions working for and reporting to the Council on Enrollment and Student Progress. Membership for the proposed working committee would be determined by Steering, Chair of Faculty Council and CAA.

5. Distance Education. Quality control is a particular concern in curricular offerings which utilize the distanced learning mode. A small but growing number of courses is being proposed with substantial distance learning components. Some entire degree programs could be offered this way to external constituencies. Will budget restructuring lead to more courses taught in this format? CAA will be meeting with the Dean’s Learning Technology Committee to discuss this issue. We believe that CAA/OAA should formulate a plan for evaluating the quality of distance learning courses NOW so that appropriate steps can be taken to ensure the quality of courses taught in this format.

If implemented, the safeguards identified above should be sufficient to avoid much of the abuse that can accompany a budget-driven academic model. However, we should also note that when academic units decide to reduce the quality of their product in order to capture a greater market share, there may be a fair amount of “voting with one’s feet.” OSU will suffer if we dumb-down the curriculum or pander to student laziness by offering trivial courses. The short-term gain afforded by the influx of willing bodies will be offset, rather quickly we fear, by the loss of our academic reputation. Students who are interested in a quality academic experience will not opt for OSU if we are blatantly trading academic quality for easy money.
To some extent we can, thus, relay upon market forces to hold the excesses in abeyance. Those units which choose to let the part-timers shoulder the load or offer courses which they are not qualified to teach will eventually suffer the fate they deserve: the loss of the students that they squandered their academic reputation to attract.